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Weinberger: US is on verge of victory

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WASHINGTON - US troops were on the verge of victory over Cuban and Cuban-backed forces on Grenada, Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger said last night.

He told reporters that Cuban defenses had been reduced to just one major "pocket of resistance" and that "about 600" Cubans - many of them combatants and almost all carrying at least rifles - had been captured.

The Defense Secretary also said that all of the more than 600 American medical students at St. George's University Medical School on the island were safe.

As he spoke, the first of two C141 transport planes bearing evacuees from Grenada touched down at Charleston Air Force Base in South Carolina. The plane carried 69 Americans and two British civilians.

Six US soldiers were killed, 33 wounded and eight were missing in fighting in Grenada, Weinberger said. Three US helicopters were also reported downed.

Weinberger said he had no good estimate on the number of Cuban or Grenadian casualties, but Gen. John W. Vessey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who accompanied Weinberger at the Pentagon press conference, said there were "20-some wounded Cubans." Weinberger and Vessey said they knew of no civilian casualties.

US troops also overran a Cuban military installation at Frequente, less than one mile north of the medical school campus at True Blue, they said. Radio gear and secret documents were captured

there and a Cuban colonel was taken prisoner, Weinberger said.

Pentagon officials said about 800 paratroopers from the Army's 82d Airborne Division arrived in Grenada yesterday to back up the US Marines and Army Rangers who descended on the Pearls and Point Salines airports by helicopter and parachute in the initial assault Tuesday.

At 2:56 p.m. yesterday, about 34 hours after the US units landed, Cuban radio announced the resistance to US forces had ended. Weinberger said at the press conference two hours later that the Cuban report was untrue.

In the area around Richmond Hill Prison, one mile east of St. George's, Cuban and Grenadian troops were still holding out, the Defense Secretary said. Weinberger and Vessey said they did not know how many of these soldiers were still fighting.

Cuban forces put up much heavier resistance than anyone had anticipated, the two officials said. Earlier yesterday, a Pentagon official said: "We're very surprised. There's no question that the Cubans are resisting like they're not just a bunch of engineers. That's a fighting force down there. . . . They're a trained force, a professional force." Other officials in the Pentagon and the State Department agreed with this assessment, as did Vessey.

About 700 Cubans reportedly have been stationed in Grenada, 500 of them construction workers. Many of them have been building a 9000-foot-long airstrip at Point Salines, which Grenadian officials said would improve tourism

but which US officials said would be used for Soviet-backed planes.

While US officials have long believed that these workers had some military reserve training, Vessey expressed surprise at how well-organized they were. "We didn't anticipate meeting Cuban fighting units," he said.

By the time of the invasion early Tuesday, according to a congressional source with contacts inside the US intelligence community, the CIA had concluded that while US medical students in Grenada may have been in some danger last week, they were "no longer in imminent danger." One of President Ronald Reagan's chief rationales for entering Grenada was to protect some 1100 American citizens residing there, most of them at the medical school.

The source also said most intelligence officials do not believe Cuba was connected with the assassination of Maurice Bishop, Grenada's former prime minister, who was killed last week

in a coup. The officials reportedly noted that Fidel Castro, Cuba's president, seemed distressed by the ouster of Bishop, who was a Marxist with close ties to Cuba.

Reagan and others in the Administration have speculated publicly that the coup may have had Cuban support - another stated justification for the American invasion.

The congressional source said CIA and British intelligence officials cooperated in planning the landing of American helicopters at the two air bases in Grenada. For example, they knew just where the Grenadian military had placed steel drums on the airstrips to impede or interfere with a landing force. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of Britain has publicly criticized the decision to invade Grenada.

Asked about the information provided by the congressional source, a Pentagon spokesman said, "We don't comment on intelligence capabilities."

The congressional source also said that just as the invasion began, the CIA told Cuban and Soviet officials that Cubans in Grenada would not be harmed if they did not resist and would be safely escorted to Cuban boats just offshore. The offer was ignored, the source said.